

TAGS & PIECES:

a photo collection of Canadian graffiti art,

volume 1 : Toronto

photographed and compiled by

Alex Spence

**Haspence
Toronto**

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INTRODUCTION

Writing (or drawing) on the wall is one of the world's oldest pastimes. We like to leave our mark, and some of us prefer the graphic muse. At Lascaux, and in Pompeii, Paris, and even America we have left our messages. Some may have been warmly received by their contemporaries; many, however, have not.

Sometimes works of this kind have come to be considered, by some, as high art. In other cases, the term graffiti is used (note 1). And, for some time now, the combination "graffiti art" has been current, a term that from one vantage point is an oxymoron. (Synonyms for graffiti art are street art, aerosol art, and low art).

The beginnings of contemporary graffiti art can be traced to the late 1960s. Dunitz says that the art form grew out of the "tags", or scrawled nicknames, that "rebellious youth" have been writing and spraying in public areas with felt-tipped pens and aerosol spray cans for the past three decades. As the number of taggers increased, he says, participants in this activity looked for new ways to distinguish themselves. The result was greater emphasis on style and artistry and the evolution of various calligraphic forms, cartoon-style characters and social commentary. Artists also experimented with technique by modifying the aerosol paint can nozzle caps to produce broader or finer lines (notes 2 and 3).

In the United States, the subway cars of New York City were, in the early 1970s, the first "canvases" for the development of various styles of the art form. From the earliest tags, the form developed towards the production of so-called "pieces" (note 4).

Although evolution of the art form during the 1970s reached the point at which there were even some mainstream gallery exhibitions in the United States and Europe, the transformation of aerosol art into a popular cultural activity was the result of "the explosion of the Hip Hop youth movement in the early 1980s, ... [a movement which included] aerosol art, along with breakdancing and rap music." The use by some rap musicians of colorful pieces in their music videos and television appearances also helped to spread the art form (note 2).

Graffiti art is now to be found throughout the urban West, and it has produced discussion, disapproval, outrage, criminal charges, documentary films, print publications, academic dissertations, and attempts at accommodation. And, in the style of the '90s, it has appeared on the Internet (note 5; also note 10 re documentary film).

Many would agree that some graffiti art is very attractive. But others prefer clean, monochromatic surfaces on publicly visible or privately owned walls, or more controlled forms of artistic display. Publicly visible graffiti, and particularly the difficult to decipher

tags that strike the eye in unexpected places, sometimes call up in the observer images of gang activity and violence, and feelings of anger, fear, and incomprehension. Discussion and disagreement sometimes focus on artistic matters, and sometimes on psychological, sociological, historical, or economic points. Often no distinction is made between, for example, the territorial gang-related graffiti particularly common in some American cities and graffiti as individual self-expression. The interested reader can begin to follow some of these threads of discussion using the reference notes (see, e.g., notes 5 and 10).

Toronto Graffiti Art

In the late 1990s, graffiti art is well established in Canada's major urban centres. In Canada's largest city, Toronto, there are (at least) five areas in which quite a number of works can be viewed. Please see the Key to Photographs section at the end of this book. Note, though, that works do appear and disappear unpredictably.

Attempts to gather biographical information on artists behind the tags were unsuccessful (note 6). However, the reader will note especially the following prominent or recurring tags or signatures: DURO3, CASE, ALONE, GRAFFITI KNIGHTS, and MONOLITH in the Scarborough section; KWOTA, SCAM, SPECS, YNN, AO, and GWEN in the downtown and Bloor West areas; and TCM, HOPE, CODE, DASER and AWR, particularly in the Dundas West/Bloor section.

And the reader might also like to know that graffiti art in Toronto is the focus of the Low Art Gallery + Museum (note 7).

Although the works photographed for this book are not commissioned works, so far as the compiler knows, it is worth mentioning that, in the political arena, the city of Toronto has been active during the past year or so through the Graffiti Project. According to James Denby, this project has "aimed to reduce the rising costs of graffiti cleanup for both the city and private businesses while ... fostering local economic development. The project's supporters hoped to replace unsightly graffiti around the city with urban art." Through this undertaking a number of community centres have been given grants to train and hire artists. The response to this project initiative was reported to be so positive that the budget for 1997 was nearly doubled over that of the previous summer, to \$286,000, and the number of participating groups increased to 15. One of the recent grant recipients was St. Stephen's Community House, which established an artistic group that has taken the name Murality. This group has been hired to do a number of murals in the Kensington Market area (note 8). Another subsidized group, active in 1997 as reported in a local Chinese-language newspaper, was "Homo Air Ectus," composed of "15 or 16" high school students who provided graffiti painting services for a fee while gaining work experience, a summer job and/or study credits (note 9).

Volume one of this work has two purposes. The first is to document an area of social history of late 1990s Toronto. The second is to record what caught the photographer's eye during a summer of exploring areas of the city that are little frequented (at least during daylight hours). The choice is a very personal one. Others would probably choose differently. And they are free to do so, because the kaleidoscope is constantly turning, and new forms are appearing on and disappearing from the city's walls. Go look for yourself.

NOTES:

- (1) "Graffiti" is the plural of "graffito", from the Italian "incised inscription or design." The definition of the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 2nd ed., is "markings, as initials, slogans, or drawings, written, spray-painted, or sketched on a sidewalk, wall of a building or public restroom, or the like". The example of usage illustrates the derogatory connotation: "These graffiti are evidence of the neighborhood's decline". In formal speech, "graffiti" takes a plural verb. In informal usage it is often used in the singular.
- (2) Dunitz, Robert J. Street Gallery : Guide to 1000 Los Angeles Murals. [Los Angeles, Calif.?] : Rjd Enterprises, 1992 (ISBN 0963286218)
(an essay titled "Aerosol Art aka Graffiti Art," excerpted from this book, is available on the Internet at <http://latino.sscnet.ucla.edu/murals/dunitz/aerosol.htm> References in the Introduction are to the electronic essay).
- (3) See page 14 of Photographs section for some examples of tags.
- (4) A "piece" is an elaborate, multicolored graffiti art work. The word is said to derive from "masterpiece".
- (5) One excellent starting point for World Wide Web sources is Georgia Tech's site at <http://artcrimes.gatech.edu/>. The "faq" file at this site contains a graffiti bibliography titled "Jane's Preliminary Bibliography", begun by Jane Gadsby of York University, Toronto. It also provides lists and sources of books and videotapes on graffiti art, as well as access to graffiti art on the Web.
- (6) A front page Steve Russell photograph of a graffiti artist, Tom Watkins, posing in front of one of his works, was published in the Toronto Star, June 4, 1997, p. A1.
- (7) Low Art Gallery + Museum, 150 Simcoe Street, Toronto M5H 3G4 Canada.
Telephone: (416)599-2575 ; Fax: (416)599-0446.
- (8) James Denby, "Painting the town red amid funding cuts," Toronto Star, August 11, 1997, p. C1.
- (9) Sing Tao, August 21, 1997, p. E1 (article in Chinese ; color illustrations).
- (10) The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation aired the documentary, "War of the Walls," on the August 4, 1997 edition of "The National." This film by Jennifer Scott, produced by Janet Thomson, explores, through interviews and commentary, the situations in Victoria, B.C. and San Francisco. Among those appearing are graffiti artists, a Victoria city councilwoman, a San Francisco police officer, and Michael Walsh, the author of a book on San Francisco graffiti art.

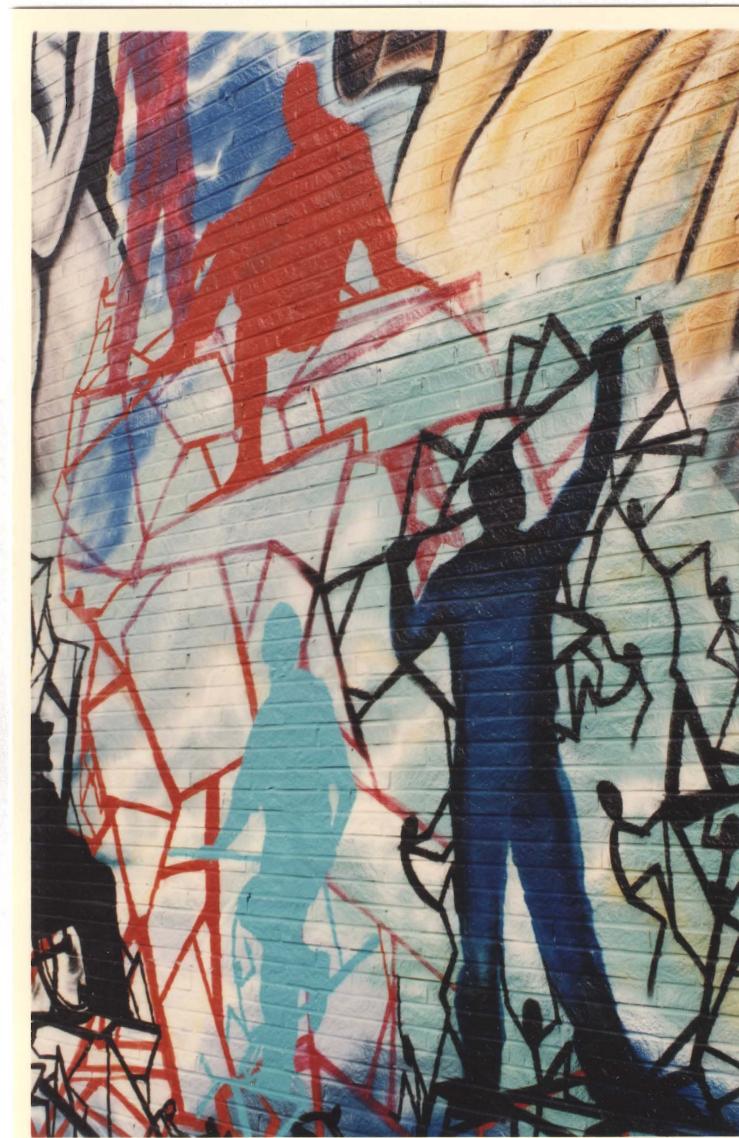
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PHOTOGRAPHS

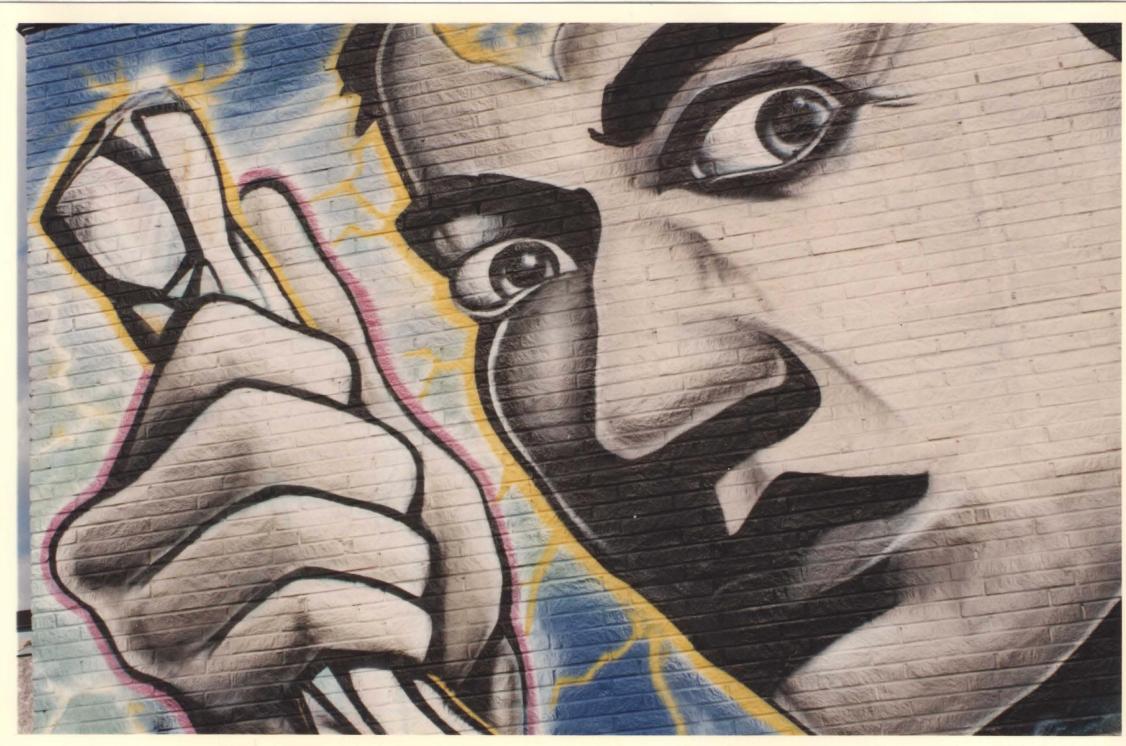


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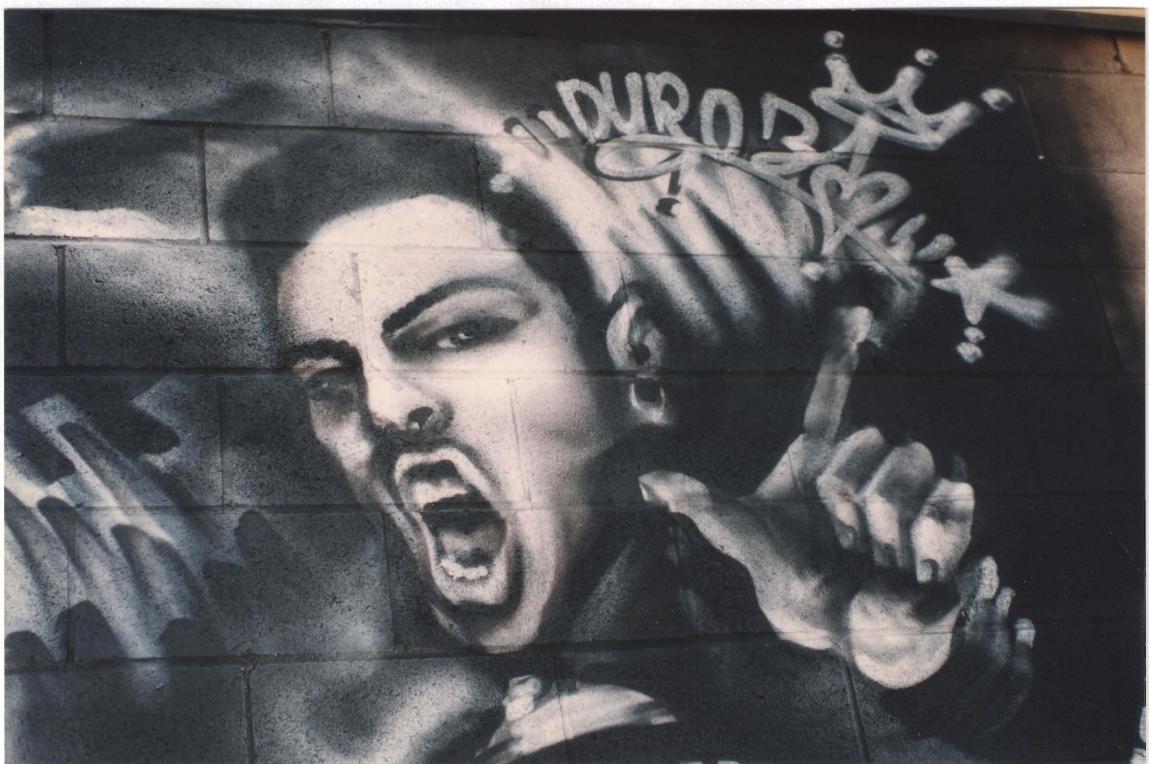






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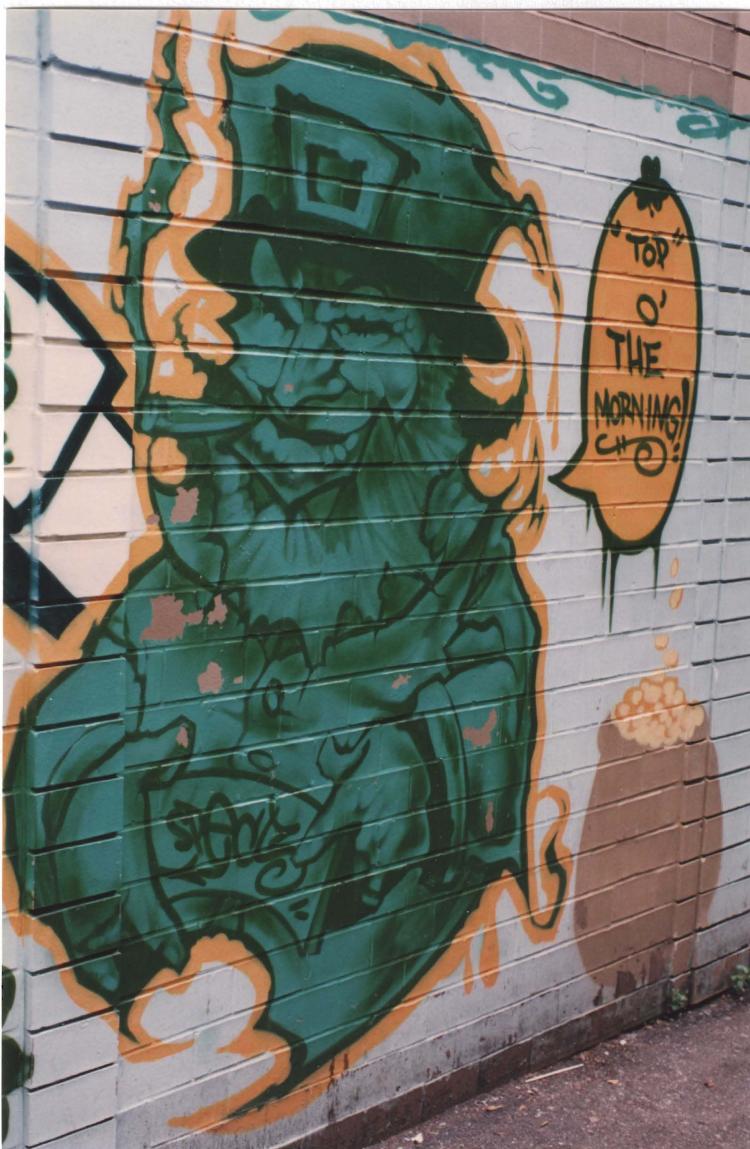
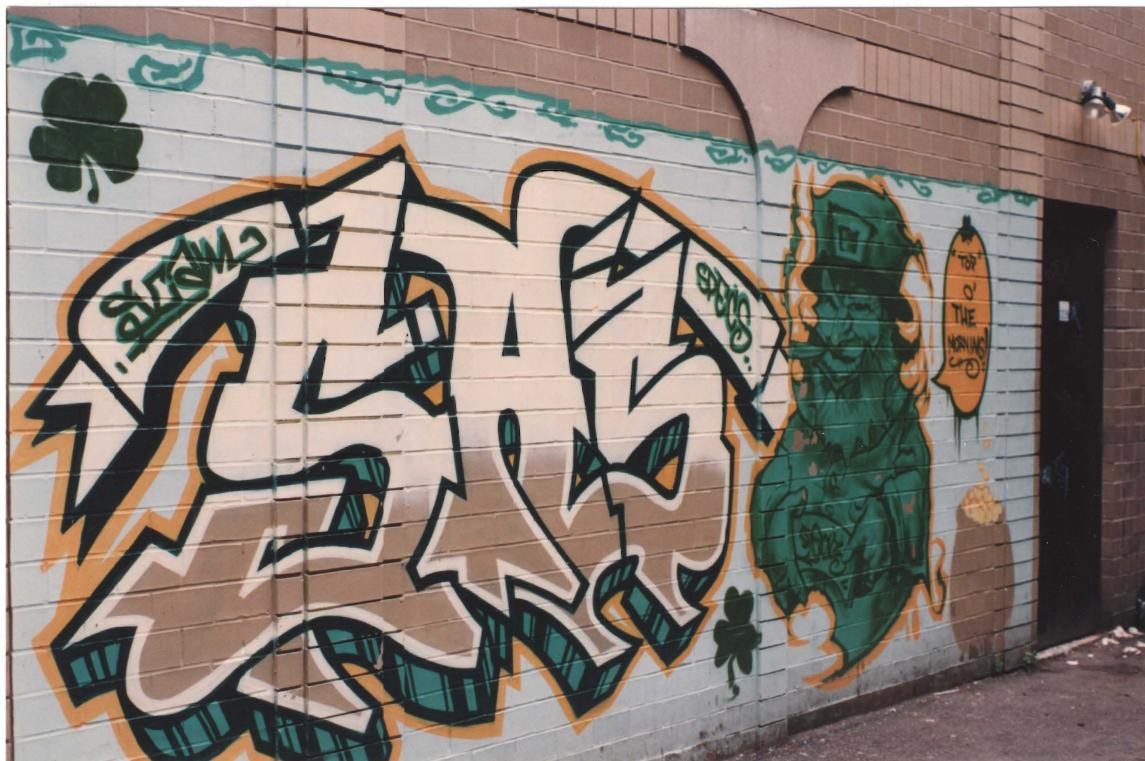




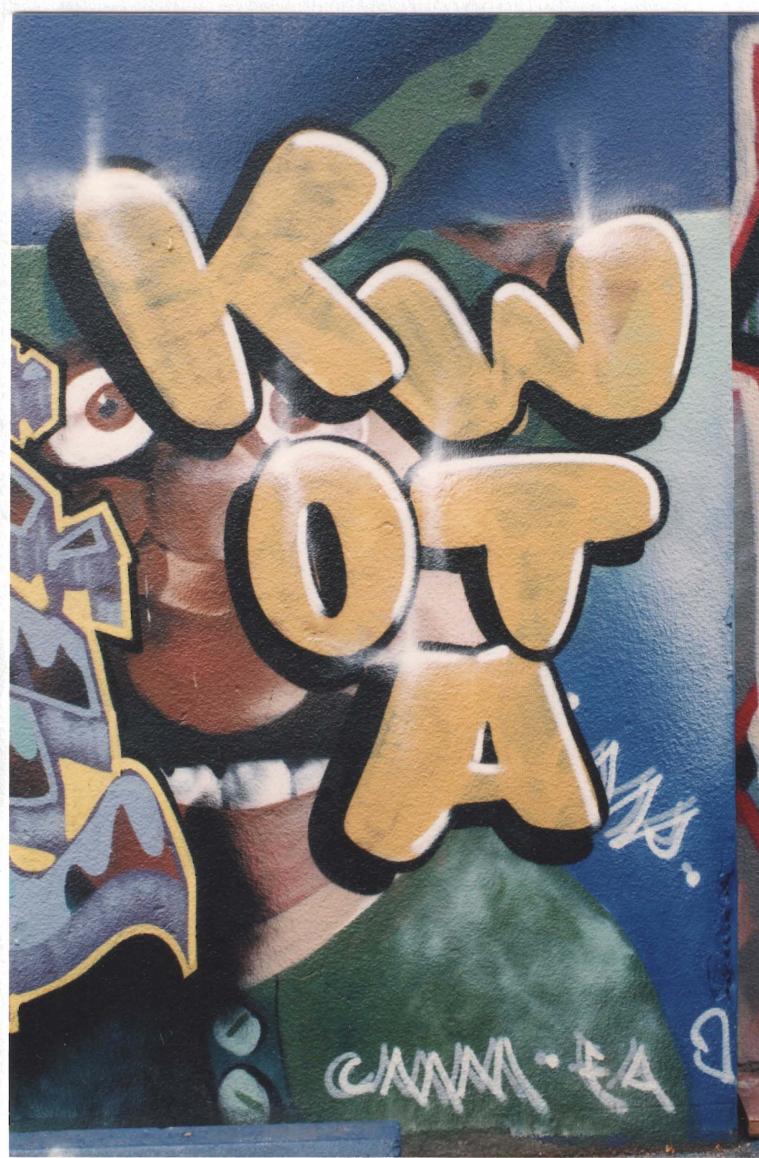




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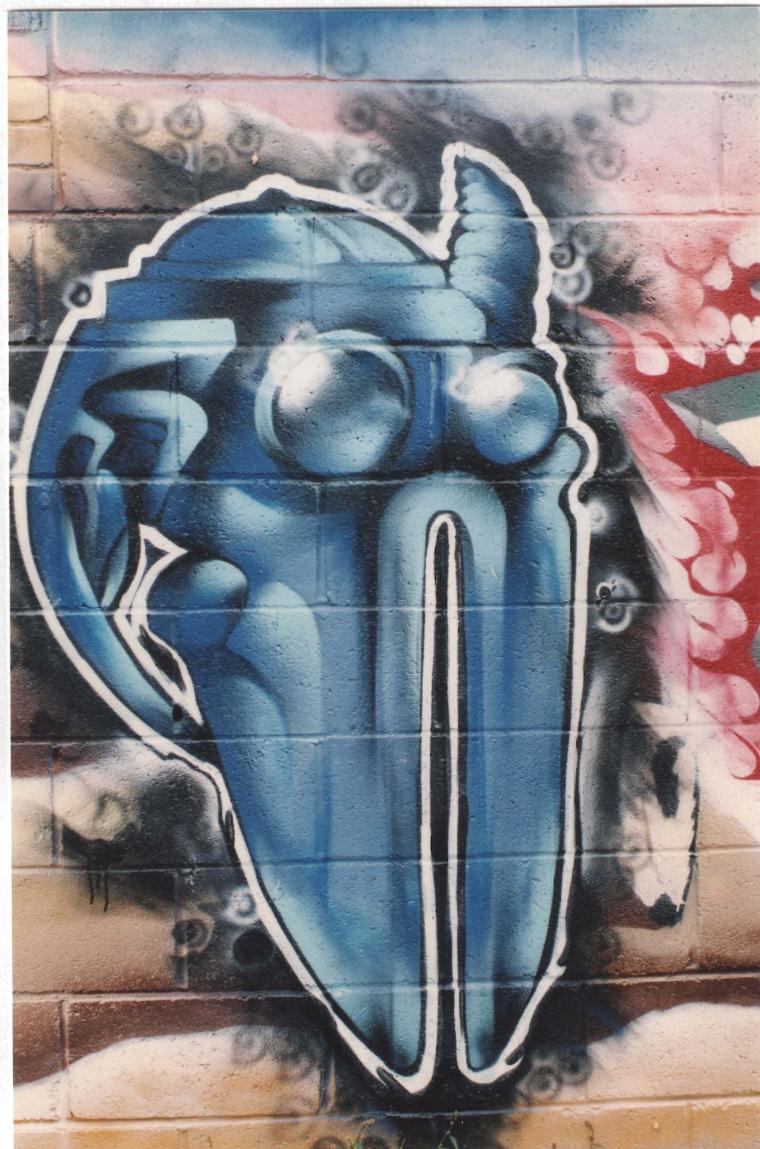


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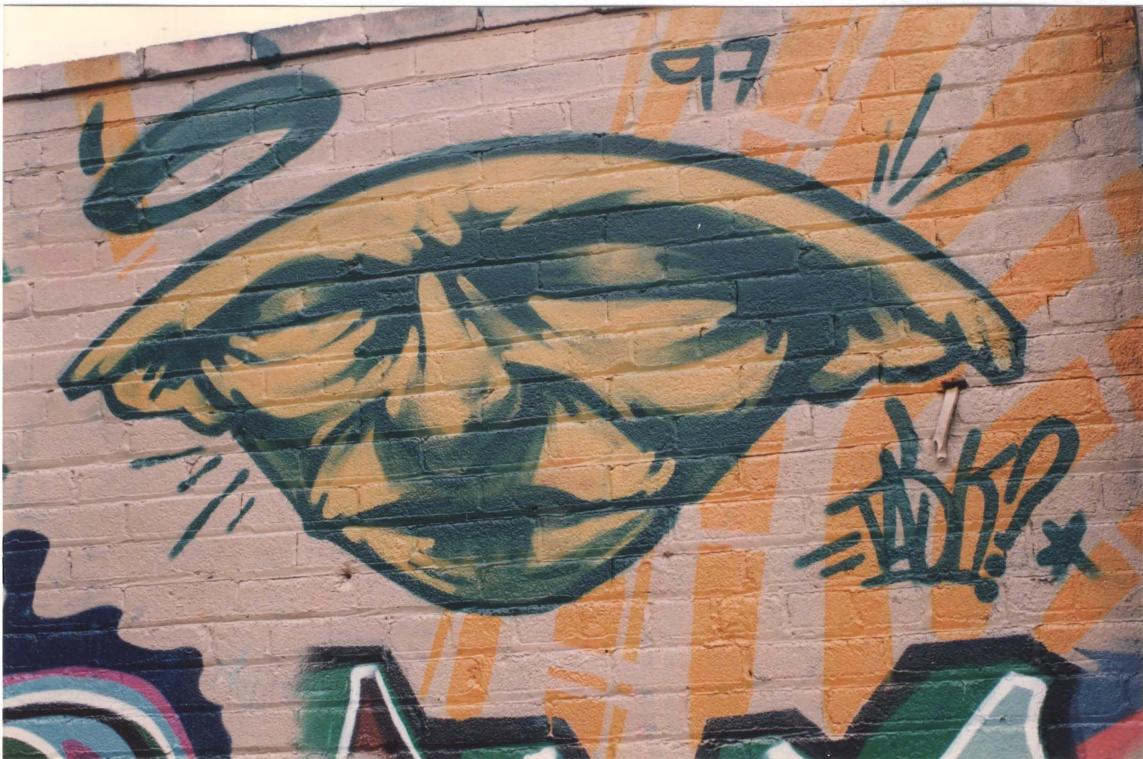


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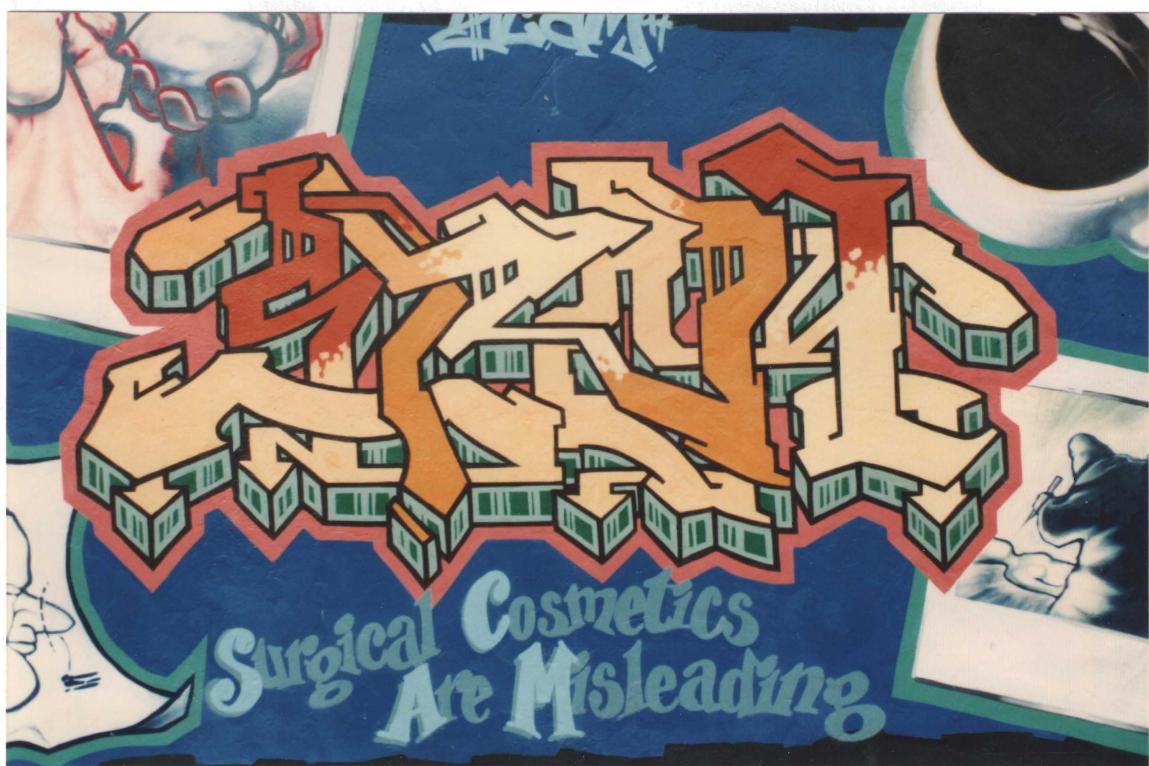


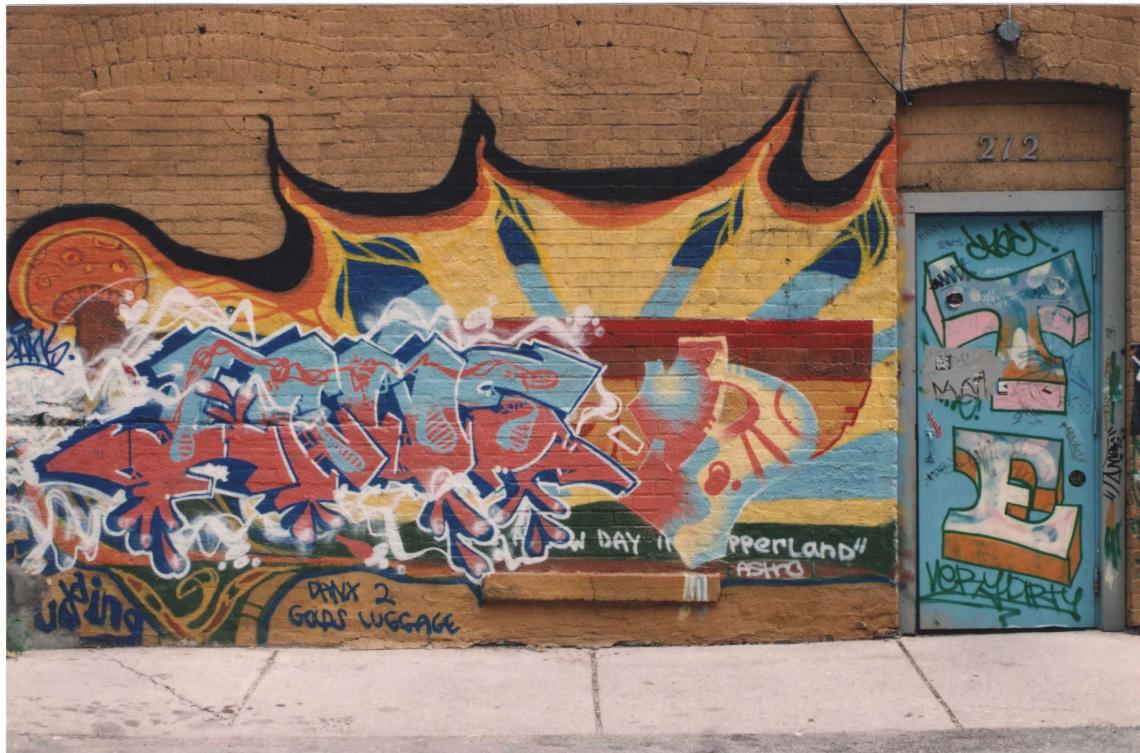
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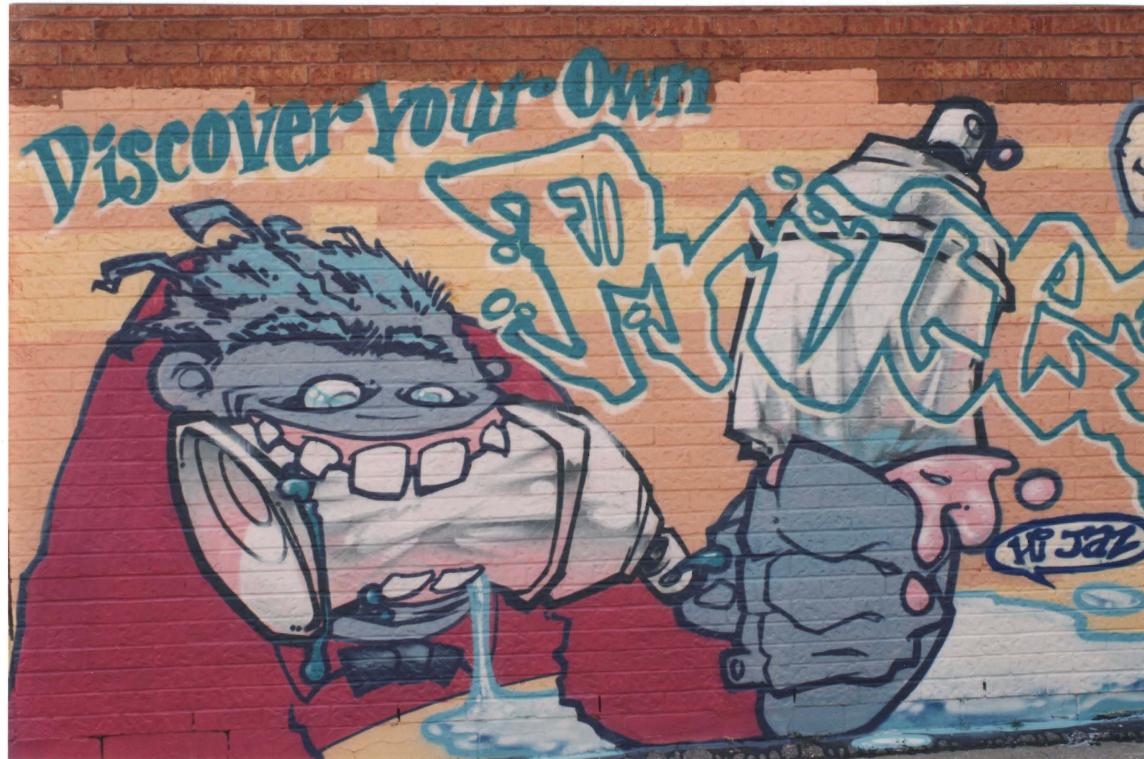
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34.





36.



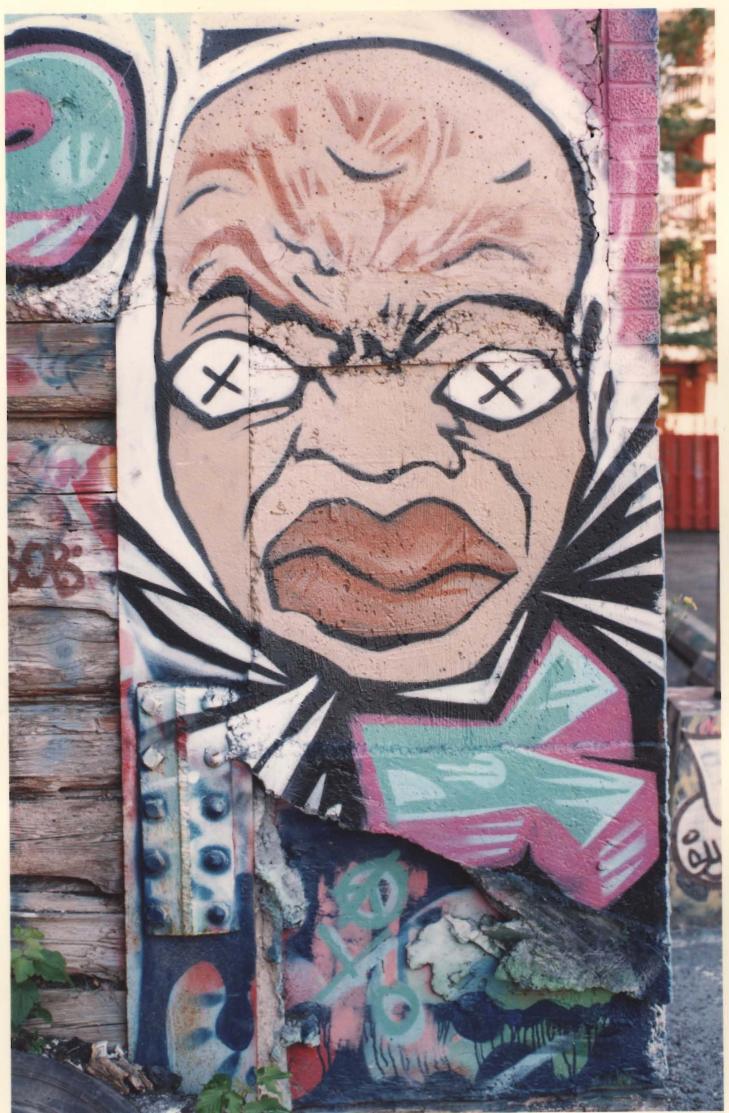












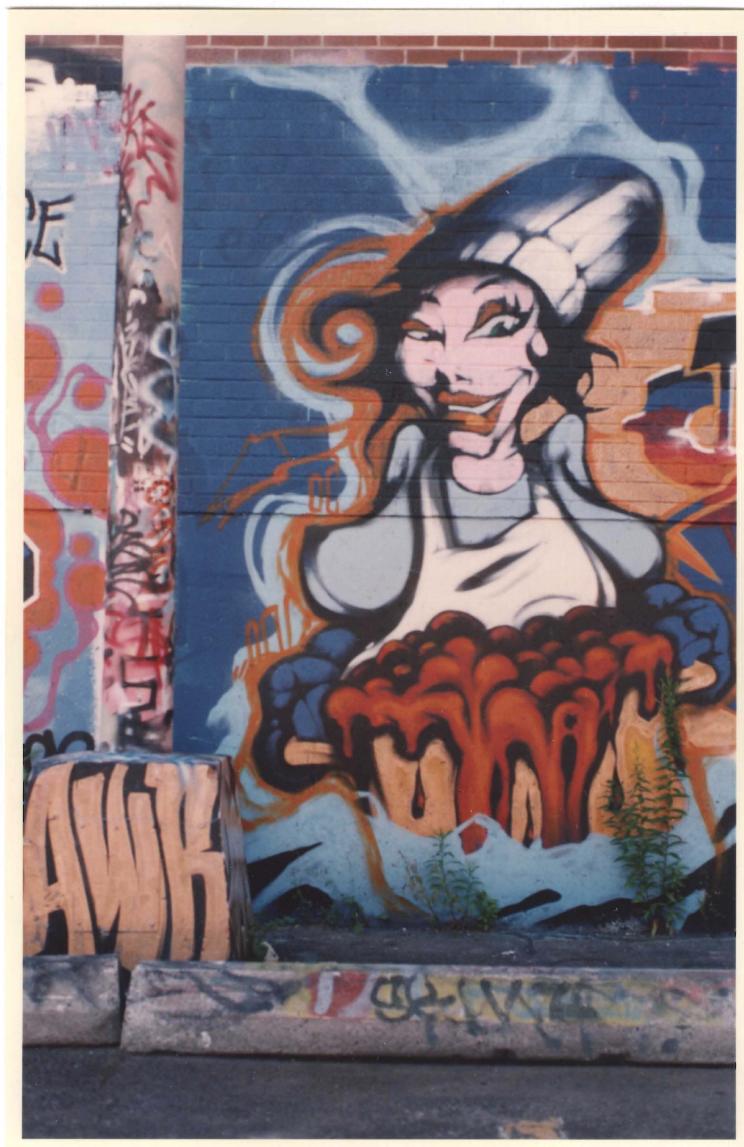
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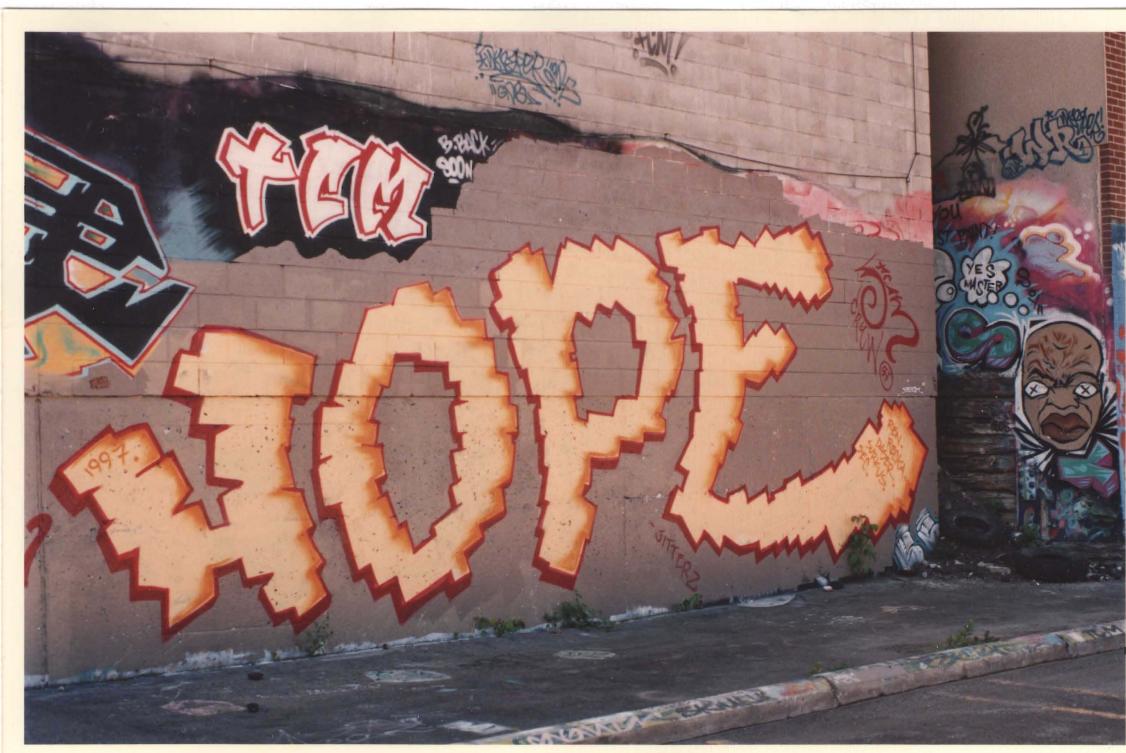


49.









**KEY TO
PHOTOGRAPHS**

KEY TO PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs were taken in five areas of Toronto and are arranged, with a few exceptions, by area as follows:

- (1) Scarborough, along the Light Rapid Transit line from Lawrence East station to Scarborough Town Centre station (pages 1-12);
- (2) the Bloor Street West-Harbord Street area between Spadina Avenue and Bathurst Street (pages 13-21);
- (3) the Queen Street West area from University Avenue in the east running to several blocks west of Bathurst Street, and including the laneways north and (especially) south of Queen Street (pages 22-36);
- (4) the Eastern Avenue/Front Street East area between Parliament Street and the Don Valley Parkway (pages 37-38);
- (5) Bloor Street West, between Dundas Street West and Keele Street (and specifically, the laneway and parking lot north of Bloor next to the subway tracks) (pages 39-53).

Refer to the address key, below, for precise locations. The few exceptions to the arrangement outline given above were made because the compiler wished to juxtapose certain photos taken in different areas. The address key provides the street address of the work photographed and a very rough estimate of the size of the original work.

Addresses of a few of the 106 photos are unfortunately not known. The photos were taken in Toronto, however.

In a few additional cases buildings were not numbered or the number could not be matched with confidence to the location of the work at the rear of the building. Here either a question mark follows the street number or a narrow range of addresses is given. The address is very close, if not exact, in these instances.

All photos were taken during the period of mid-July to late August 1997. By early September 1997 some works in the Bloor St. West/Dundas St. West area had already disappeared. The city explorer who would like to search out the originals should keep the likelihood of disappearance in mind to avoid frustration. (If a work is known to have disappeared, the word "gone" follows the address and the precise location given below is just a curiosity).

The address key refers to photos by page number, with "t" referring to the top photo on the page and "b" to the bottom photo. Size is roughly estimated in feet and is given in the form (horizontal measurement X vertical measurement). When full wall shots are accompanied by photos of details, measurements are sometimes given for the full work only.

ADDRESS KEY

<u>PAGE</u>		<u>ADDRESS</u>	<u>SIZE</u>
<u>SCARBOROUGH AREA</u>			
1	t	230 Midwest Road, side, facing laneway at 260	12 x 8
	b	80 Midwest Road	6 x 8
2	t	202(?) Eastern Avenue (bldg. east of 200)	20 x 7
	b	2450 Lawrence Ave. East, west wall	detail of 3t
3	t	2450 Lawrence Ave. East, west wall	50 x 15
	b	2450 Lawrence Ave. East, west wall	detail of 3t
4t-5b		2450 Lawrence Ave. East, west wall	details of 3t
6	t	260 Midwest Road, rear	90 x 15
	b	260 Midwest Road, rear	5 x 10
7	t	80 Midwest Road, rear	40 x 5
	b	80 Midwest Road, rear	22 x 15
8	t	80 Midwest Road	10 x 7
	b	80 Midwest Road	detail of 9t
9	t	80 Midwest Road	36 x 12
	b	80 Midwest Road	detail of 9t
10	t	26 Golden Gate Court, rear	63 x 15
10b-12t		26 Golden Gate Court, rear	details of 10t
12	b	unknown address, Toronto (downtown area?)	8 x 6
<u>BLOOR-HARBORD/SPADINA-BATHURST AREA</u>			
13	t	169 Harbord St.	36 x 15
	b	169 Harbord St.	detail of 13t
14	t	184 Harbord St.	20 x 4
	b	650 King St. West, side wall	4 x 2
15	t	unknown address, Toronto (downtown area)	20 x 10
	b	292 Brunswick Ave., north wall	12 x 7

<u>PAGE</u>		<u>ADDRESS</u>	<u>SIZE</u>
16	t	415 Bloor St. West, east wall	24 x 8
	b	415 Bloor St. West, east wall	detail of 16t
17	t	386 Bloor St. West, rear	21 x 7
	b	386 Bloor St. West, rear	detail of 17t
18	t	292 Brunswick Ave., north wall	15 x 5
	b	292 Brunswick Ave., north wall	3 x 4
19	t	292 Brunswick Ave., west wall	10 x 6
	b	292 Brunswick Ave., west wall	4 ft. dia. (sun)
20	t	292 Brunswick Ave., west wall	30 x 12
	b	292 Brunswick Ave., west wall	3 x 5
21	t	292 Brunswick Ave, west wall	4 x 4
	b	292 Brunswick Ave., north wall	9 x 6
<u>QUEEN ST. WEST/UNIVERSITY-BATHURST AREA</u>			
22	t	194 Queen St. West, rear	40 x 12
	b	194 Queen St. West, rear	18 x 12
23	t	194 Queen St. West, rear	5 x 12
	b	282-284 Queen St. West., sidewalk drawing	3 x 3
24	t	478 Queen St. West, rear	5 x 7 (spiral)
	b	unknown address, Toronto (Queen St. West?)	15 x 4
25	t	212 Queen St. West, rear	30 x 10
	b	212 Queen St. West, rear	25 x 12
26	t	312 Queen St. West, east wall (by parking lot)	30 x 15
	b	312 Queen St. West, east wall (by parking lot)	12 x 4
27	t	212 Queen St. West, rear	25 x 12
	b	152 Spadina Ave., north (side) wall	12 x 7
28	t	152 Spadina Ave., west (rear) wall	15 x 6
	b	152 Spadina Ave., west (rear) wall	15 x 7
29	t	152 Spadina Ave., north (side) wall	12 x 7
	b	545 Queen St. West, rear	20 x 10

PAGE		ADDRESS	SIZE
30	t	549 Queen St. West, side	12 x 6
	b	198 Eastern Ave., metal fence	8 x 4
31	t	170(?) Bathurst St. (north across laneway from 168 Bathurst St.)	10 x 4
	b	569 Queen St. West, west (side) wall	12 x 5
32	t	530 Richmond St. West, east side	4 x 4 x 8
	b	607A Queen St. West, east side	12 x 6
33	t	575 Queen St. West, rear	12 x 4
	b	567 Queen St. West, rear	4 x 3
34	t	563 Queen St. West, rear	20 x 10
	b	169 Harbord St., north door	3 x 7
35	t	170(?) Bathurst St. (north across laneway from 168 Bathurst St.)	15 ft. diameter
	b	precise address unknown. North across laneway from 168 Bathurst St., at rear of Queen St. West building	7 x 6
36	t	567 Queen St. West, side	12 x 2
	b	709 Queen St. West, east rear door	3 x 7

EASTERN AVE./FRONT ST. EAST AREA

37	t	precise address unknown. North wall of warehouse on Front St. East between Parliament St. and Cypress St. (same wall as 38b)	12 x 4
	b	202(?) Eastern Ave. (bldg. east of 200)	7 x 3
38	t	202(?) Eastern Ave. (bldg. east of 200)	6 x 3
	b	precise address unknown. See note at 37t	9 x 3

BLOOR ST. WEST/DUNDAS WEST-KEELE AREA

39	t	1564 or 1566 Bloor St. West, rear, west wall	5 x 5
	b	2345 Dundas St. West, rear west wall, in laneway	50 x 15
40	t	1588 or 1590 Bloor St. West, rear	25 x 9
	b	1600 Bloor St. West, rear, side	12 x 7

<u>PAGE</u>		<u>ADDRESS</u>	<u>SIZE</u>
41	t	1610 Bloor St. West, rear	7 x 7
	b	1660-1678 Bloor St. West, rear. Post support in parking lot	2 x 3
42	t	1678 Bloor St. West, rear and side, in parking lot n/a	
	b	1678 Bloor St. West, rear (on side wall facing 1660 Bloor St. W.)	2 x 1
43	t	1678 Bloor St. West., rear (on side wall facing 1660 Bloor St. W.)	2 x 4
	b	1660 Bloor St. West, rear	18 x 12
44	t	1596 Bloor St. West, rear	3 x 5
	b	1604 Bloor St. West, rear	10 x 8
45	t	1610 Bloor St. West, rear, east wall (gone)	21 x 6
	b	1610 Bloor St. West, rear, east wall	3 x 6
46	t	1632 Bloor St. West, rear	15 x 6
	b	1600 Bloor St. West, rear	6 x 7
47	t	1596 Bloor St. West, rear	3 x 4
	b	1678 Bloor St. West, rear	27 x 10
48	t	1632 Bloor St. West, rear (gone)	20 x 10
	b	1678 Bloor St. West, rear, in parking lot	5 x 9 (figure)
49	t	Retaining wall facing east rear wall of 1638 Bloor St. West (rear of vacant lot at 1636 Bloor St. West) (gone)	3 x 6
	b	1570 Bloor St. West, rear	12 x 5
50	t	1660 Bloor St. West, rear	10 x 5
	b	1610 Bloor St. West, rear	18 x 4
51	t	1564 or 1566 Bloor St. West, rear, east wall	3 x 3
	b	1660 Bloor St. West, rear	2 x 1 (shoes)
52	t	1570 Bloor St. West, rear	6 x 6
	b	1660 Bloor St. West, rear (detail of 53b)	9 x 3
53	t	202(?) Eastern Ave. (bldg. next to 200)	8 x 4
	b	1660 Bloor St. West, rear	34 x 9